

"Flexibility helps prevent injury to athletes of all ages"

The crowd is on its feet wild with excitement. One basket and the championship trophy stays at home with your team. The basketball rebounds off the backboard directly into your daughter's hands. There are scant seconds left to play in the last period of the game. She pivots quickly to takeoff up the court outpacing everyone; all of a sudden she pulls up grimacing in pain and grabbing the back of her leg. She falls to floor the victim of a hamstring pull, possibly even a muscle tear, which could have been prevented - before time ran out!

Children are capable of placing themselves in all sorts of situations that demand good physical conditioning, especially flexibility. Running while playing soccer or baseball, high kicks in the martial arts, running the court in basketball, leaps in dance, and back walkovers in gymnastics all demand a wide range of motion from the muscles involved, in other words flexibility.

Unfortunately, when an activity is so dynamic that it extends a body part beyond its normal range of motion, an injury may occur. Usually, the injury is something minor like a muscle pull or strain, but it could also become a tear or a muscle separation from the bone on which it is anchored. To prevent such an injury all children should learn a basic flexibility program appropriate to their sport.

There are several aspects to flexibility (like joint specificity) that time and space will not allow for in this article, including some new thought on the subject that suggests extensive stretching before an activity is not as important as simply getting the blood flowing with some cardiovascular activity like jumping jacks. Stretching for flexibility then occurs after the workout for maximum benefit. Consult with your coach for flexibility techniques appropriate to the sport your child enjoys.

However, as an example to help prevent hamstring pulls (muscle on the back of the upper leg) let's evaluate your child's flexibility in the lower back, hips, and the back of the upper legs. You can give your child this easy test.

Take a twelve-inch ruler and mark off one inch increments down the middle of a piece of paper. At the six-inch mark draw the number zero. Then, in one direction, mark the positive numbers +1, +2, +3, etc. In the other direction, write the numbers -1, -2, -3, etc.

Have your child sit on the floor with her legs extended. The back of her knees should remain flat on the floor with her toes pointing toward the ceiling. Place the

scale marked with 1-inch units at her feet so the zero aligns with her heels. Every inch mark towards the body is marked -1, -2, -3 and so on; each inch beyond the heels starting with +1, +2, +3 and so forth.

Now, have your child extend her arms out to her toes. Stop if it hurts, and by all means do not allow her to bounce or drive herself forcefully forward to get a better score! Only let her reach as far as possible without excess pain! If your child can just barely reach her toes she would have a zero score, which would be an average score. If she cannot touch her toes, she would receive a negative score of -1 or less. A child who shows good flexibility would have a positive score of +1 or greater.

Don't panic if your child can't touch her toes, but please don't ignore it. There are many solutions to this problem. Involving your child in physical activities at a young age that focus on all aspects of fitness, especially proper conditioning and flexibility has benefits that will last into her adult life. Great activities that develop these components, especially flexibility are; gymnastics, martial arts, dance, and yoga. These are great “gateway” activities that have advantages for other sports activities.

Pay attention while your child learns proper flexibility because some of the techniques for stretching hamstrings just might help relieve some lower back pain for you too – but please check with you doctor or chiropractor first before stretching or attempting to re-live your childhood sports fantasies.

#

Notice: This article may be used in any publication as long as it is used in its entirety without modification (minus this notice). When possible, please include the copyright notice, web site URL, and email contact information on each printed or screen page online.

Rik Feeney, author of *Gymnastics: A Guide for Parents and Athletes*, also former gymnast, coach, and private gymnastics club owner condenses over thirty years experience working with gymnasts from novice to elite level into easy to read books and reports for gymnasts, cheerleaders, parents, instructors, and coaches. His latest book, *Back Handsprings: The Secret Techniques* is available at: <http://www.GymnasticsTrainingTips.com>.